

WGUMC April 7, 2019 Luke 23:39-43
“Today you will be with me in Paradise”

I was having a discussion with Jerry Hutcheson on Thursday. He and Linda are moving to the Terraces. And I was sharing with him about how my parents are having a hard time deciding when is the right time to move out of their home in Loveland. For my folks, it would be a lot easier if they knew how long they were going to live, because then they would know how long their money needed to last.

Well, the criminal in our story today doesn't have to worry about the cost of long-term care. He knows that he's going to be dead very soon, and he says to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus says to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

That's a curious statement for a couple of reasons. For one thing, we know that crucifixion was a long and agonizing way to die. Depending on the method used, it could take days. But Jesus must somehow know that it won't take that long, because he says, “Today...”

He goes on to say, “You will be with me in Paradise,” but that is not what the Christian Church has been saying. The Church has traditionally taught that we don’t immediately go to Heaven when we die. Our bodies are buried in the ground. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and all that. But the Bible gives us the impression that our bodies won’t rise again until the Resurrection at the Last Day. So, in the meantime, what do our disembodied souls do? They have to go somewhere to wait. That somewhere is Purgatory for Catholics. Protestants call it the Intermediate State. But the fact is that no one really knows where or what that is. Except that it isn’t quite Heaven.

So, if tradition teaches that our souls and bodies don’t get back together and get into Heaven until the Last Day, what does Jesus mean when he says, “Today you will be with me in Paradise”? To try to answer that question, let’s revisit the scene of the Crucifixion.

Jesus was crucified with two men, one on his right and one on his left. One of those men derided him. The other defended him. For that, he is known as the “good thief,” but there is a good chance that he was not a thief. The word in Greek can be translated “bandit,” and it was used for robbers but also for rebels. In the Gospel of John we read that Jesus Barabbas was a bandit, and in Gospel of Mark, we learn that he was in prison for being an insurrectionist. Barabbas and others had been involved in armed rebellion against Rome. That gives us some context to understand what Jesus says to the Roman soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?” [Mark 14:48; Matthew 26:55; Luke 22:52]

In fact, that’s exactly what the Roman soldiers were doing. They considered Jesus and the people around him to be bandits, rebels, or at best religious zealots who were stoking the fires of

rebellion. When Jesus was tried, he was convicted of claiming to be “the king of the Jews,” a pretender to the throne, a rebel for sure.

At the urging of the crowd, Pilate agreed to release Jesus Barabbas instead of Jesus of Nazareth in honor of Passover. [Mark 15:6-10] But it is hard for me to believe that the Romans would really do this—release such a notorious prisoner—unless they considered Jesus to be just as or even more dangerous. The Gospel of Mark says that Barabbas wasn’t the only rebel in prison, so I’m convinced that we have two of his comrades there on the cross with Jesus. They are freedom fighters, rebels, or terrorists, depending on your perspective, and to one of them, Jesus says, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

What is Paradise? If you’ve been keeping up with the Lenten devotions, you’ll have read what my husband wrote about the word “paradise.” It comes from a Persian word that originally meant “walled garden.” That word was taken into Greek and when the Old

Testament was translated from the Hebrew into Greek, the Garden of Eden became Paradise.

So as Jesus talks about Paradise while he is hanging from the cross, I can't help but think of that original Paradise. That Garden had its own rebels, too. Adam and Eve rebelled against God when they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil because the Serpent told them that they would become like gods. They figured that they didn't need God. God said, "Fine, then you don't need to live here" and kicked them out of Eden.

Now we have Jesus on the cross, talking to yet another rebel. But instead of telling him that he is kicking him out of the Garden, out of Paradise, Jesus welcomes him in. It's pretty clear to me that this rebel hanging there with Jesus is a stand-in for all of us, for the rebel that is in us.

The felony we have all committed is rebelling against God, trying to be our own god. Let my will, not thy will, be done. We

aren't evil. We are just doing what God would be doing, should be doing, if God were paying attention.

Our capital offense, the crime which will be the end of us, is when we overthrew the power of Love in our lives and put in the throne room of our hearts the powers that we were left with: the power of Ego, the power of Pride, the power of Fear, the power of Hurt, the power of Guilt, the power of Hate.

We all know what it's like hanging on that cross, don't we? To not know the Power of Love in our lives hurts like hell. Like the other guy in the story, we look at Jesus hanging on the cross and think, "That's where Love gets you." And even though we may say to him, "Save us," we don't really mean it. We don't believe it. That's the rebel in us.

But there's something else in us, too. There's something that—despite everything, despite the disastrous circumstances we find ourselves in—says, "Remember me." Remember me. The psalm says, "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!" [Psalm 25:7] We can't say, "Fake news!" The facts are plain as day. It is what it is; I am what I am. I am not just who I am on my best days. I am also who I am on my worst days. That old song, "Just as I am, without one plea," was written for me. Lord, sin has dismembered me. So, re-member me. Remember me through the rose-colored glasses of your love. In your eyes, I am beautiful. In your love, I become loveable. Re-member me. Remake me.

So when the rebel says "Remember me," he is really saying, "Forgive me." And when he says, "Forgive me," he says, "Befriend me." He hasn't made amends for all his wrongs. He hasn't learned how to pray. He hasn't been baptized or read the Bible or memorized the creed or kept the sabbath. All he says is "Remember me," and that's enough. Today, he's with Jesus, so by definition he is in Paradise. Still suffering, he is saved. Today.

Remember this the next time you are stuck in a situation and you don't know what to do. You don't know how to live and you feel

as though you are going to die. Just say, “Remember me when you come into your kin-dom.” When you befriend Jesus, your outward situation may not immediately change. But from that moment, your inner world has shifted and your reality, your ultimate reality, will never be the same. The rebel on the cross says, “Come, hang out with Jesus,” because whenever you are with him, you are already in Paradise.

There is an old British sitcom about a bunch of seniors in a retirement home. For my parents and their peers, it might hit too close to home. It is called “Waiting for God.” Well, we don’t have to wait for God. We don’t have to die to get to Heaven. John Wesley used to say, believers live in eternity and walk in eternity. And in my opinion that is the best answer to our question about what Jesus meant when he said, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Wesley’s last words, though not as famous as these last words of Jesus, were strikingly similar. If you’ve ever gotten an email from me, you’ll know them: “The best of all is, God is with us.”